

NEWSLETTER



A PLANT MYSTERY

Each issue of the CRC VPNS newsletter will feature a Plant Mystery (e.g., why are all the monarchs gathering on THIS specific goldenrod? What's making those perfect circles in the prairie grass?). We will ask different experts to supply the answer, which you'll find later in the newsletter.

This month's mystery and answer are offered by Stafford County Extension Agents, Grace Kunkel:

Is it true that if a spotted lanternfly feeds on milkweed, the milkweed kills the fly?

(Answer on p. 4)

A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAPTER PRESIDENT



Stacey Churchill

Welcome to our first ever newsletter! As with everything in our chapter, this newsletter is only possible because of a great volunteer - Charlotte Hunter! Thanks Charlotte for the time and vision that went into making our chapter newsletter a reality!

Gosh, what a six months it has been! What started with a native plant garden tour on June 28th, turned into the newest chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society on September 10th. I am so happy to have found so many like-minded souls in the Central Rappahannock Region, and I am grateful for how many of you are with me on this journey to Know, Grow and Protect! As of this writing, we have 84 Charter Members and Jan Smith, our Membership Chair, is working hard to send out magnets to you all. Thanks Jan!

(Stacey's message continues on p. 5)

CAN YOU SAY, “RAPPAHANNOCK EDUCATION FARM?”

Under a grey November sky, a slender, bespectacled man named Rich Larochelle stood near rows of ready-to-harvest curly kale. Facing him was a group of twelve volunteers, aged 70 to 3.

“How many of you have ever eaten kale fresh?” he asked. “Before you harvest it, you ought to know what it tastes like.” He snapped stalks of the dark-green, curly-edged vegetable from one of the many nearby bunches, then handed one to each of us.

Dubious, I nibbled a small mouthful ... and had a revelatory moment: the curls tasted like an earthy broccoli.

We were each assigned a row and began picking the broad stalks, securing each bunch with rubber bands, then loading these into black plastic bins. Around us stretched eleven and a half acres of land once eyed by developers for townhouses—until the discovery the land doesn’t perk. In stepped Rich Larochelle and the other members of the board of directors of the REF.

The REF was conceived as a way to supply fresh vegetables to those in need and this non-perking land was perfect. As we picked, Rich explained that each bunch would end up in the kitchen of a Fredericksburg family who couldn't afford fresh vegetables. “That's vitamin K and calcium for kids who need it.”

He waved at the neatly laid-out rows. “Last year this whole place was covered with brambles, tractor tires, and other junk.” Money was raised, volunteers cleared the land, irrigation was installed, and potatoes, kale, collards, radishes, zucchini and a host of other vegetables were planted. A barn will soon be added for equipment storage as well as a greenhouse that will allow vegetables to be grown and donated during the winter months.

Since its start in early 2025, the REF, a 501(c)(3) community-owned farm, has grown, harvested, and donated over 43,000 pounds of fresh, healthy produce to the area’s food banks, enough to fill the plates of hundreds of families. The 2026 goal is to grow and donate 60,000 pounds of produce, and volunteers are always welcome.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT:



Each quarter we will highlight one of our members. In addition to basic facts about a spotlighted member, they can share their biggest native plant failures, unexpected successes, non-natives they can't live without, gardening dreams, or advocacy/conservation efforts that have deeply touched them.

This month, meet **Donna Clifton**

BORN: Richmond, VA

GREW UP: Lorton, VA, when today's beautiful Workhouse was still the D.C. Public Jail.

EDUCATION: Art History, University of Mary Washington

GOAL: Become a park ranger. Instead, she found an employment home at the Population Reference Bureau.

NATIVE GARDENING: She began transforming much of her garden in 2024.

CONFESSION: She loves native plants, so buys plants continually, alas, many of them unsuitable for her yard ... which allows her to give lots of plants to friends.

(THE REF CONT'D)

When all the bins were filled with bundles of kale, Rich pulled out a camera. "Picture time!" he announced.

We gathered amidst the remaining kale bunches.

"Can you say Rappahannock Education Farm?"

Arms raised in victory, we yelled out the name, then headed toward the gravel parking lot, former strangers united for two hours by kale, nature's most unlikely community connector.

Would you like to be part of this wonderful effort? If so, here's the link:
<https://www.rappahannockfarm.org/volunteer/>.

And when you visit the REF, be sure to look for the native plant garden planted by our own members!



PLANT MYSTERY: THE ANSWER

This question is one Grace Kunkel and her cohort, Sam Ragon, hear a lot. The truth: Research on this is being conducted, but there is no solid evidence (so far) that feeding on milkweed kills a spotted lanternfly. The fly is also a generalist--it feeds on a lot of plants--so milkweed is unlikely to be able to control it completely. But considering these flies are likely to be very present in our area next year, this could be a good one to explore!



BATS & SPOTTED LANTERNFLIES

While there's no evidence (yet) that milkweed kills the lanternfly, researchers who monitor the guano of the big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*) and the eastern red bat (*Lasiurus borealis*) have discovered both species love eating the Spotted Lanternfly. Studies are just beginning, but this is a hopeful sign that our native bat species are adapting to a new food source. Support bats! Learn more at <http://bit.ly/41W0rsa>.



DID YOU KNOW ...?

FUNGUS BATTERIES?

Scientists in Switzerland have created a 3D-printed battery powered by fungal cells mixed into a cellulose-based printing ink. The battery--or fuel cell--is completely non-toxic and biodegradable. Learn more about them at [Building a Greener Workplace](#)

CORNELL LAB & BIRD ID

Bird ID is a browser-based quizzing tool developed by Cornell Lab Learning Academy that helps us work on identifying the birds that enjoy our native gardens or that we see when we're traveling. It goes at just the right pace and you choose which birds to learn. There is a free version, but the majority of birds require a paid subscription. If you love birds, you can check it out here: <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/birdwise/>.

Cont'd: President's Message

Our summer months were marked by the generosity of the Worshams, Ackermans, Stones and Hartzells who welcomed us to their homes and toured us through all the possibilities that planting with natives can bring. Each home was unique, inspirational and a chance to learn. We are grateful to each of these families.

While we toured, we also put in the background work to make our chapter a reality: volunteers created draft by-laws, started up social media and web accounts, formed an interim board, outlined our chapter leadership roles and began some community outreach. By the time the VNPS Board approved our petition for a chapter we were ready to host our first Chapter Meeting, elect our first Board and Committee Chairs.

We hit the ground running, forming a partnership with the Rappahannock Education Farm with a commitment to maintain the native pollinator garden started by three of our members in Spring 2025. We also started up some self-education in each of three core areas of focus: Know, Grow, Protect.

Thanks to our Know/Botany Chair Rosie Green, we began a year-long botany course that includes both online learning and field studies in the spring. Our Protect/Advocacy Chair Ruth Landry-Stone began informing our members about the impact of incoming data centers on native plants. And Laurel Major, with an assist from Maureen Aylward, taught a Winter Sowing class in December.

I am so proud of all we have accomplished in such a short time! We are working hard on 2026 plans for the chapter as well. We are kicking things off with a Winter Sowing Party on January 17th to grow plants for a spring fundraiser. The year will continue with our botany course, garden tours, tabling at several events, partnering with local organizations on invasive removal, bringing in speakers for our membership meetings and more.

Thanks to all of you for your support and participation, I look forward to getting to know each of you better as we grow together

Stacey





Upcoming Events

All-Member Meeting

Ready for another good get-together? The CRC VPNS semi-annual meeting will take place on 25 April, from 11:00 to 1:00, at the Aikido Fredericksburg - 6155 Hickory Ridge Road, Spotsylvania, VA 22551.

Mother's Day Fun

On Mother's Day (9-10 May) the Blandy Experimental Farm, near Winchester, which is home to the Virginia Arboretum, will hold its 36th Garden Fair. At this family-friendly event, a wide selection of native plants, annuals, perennials, herbs, trees, shrubs, garden tools and unique nature-inspired gifts will be available to purchase. Food trucks, environmental nonprofits, a wine and beer vendor, music, a children's scavenger hunt and Arboretum tours rounded out this much anticipated Mother's Day Weekend tradition.

<https://blandy.virginia.edu/garden-fair>.



More chapter fun

In May our chapter will hold a native plant sale (more details to follow), and on 30 May members will clean up and plant the native plants in our garden at the Rappahannock Education Farm. In addition, we have garden tours galore lined up for the warm months, so keep an eye out for announcements on our Facebook page.